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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 001156

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL TU AZ IR

SUBJECT: IRAN/AZERBAIJAN: DISPARATE IRANIANS NETWORK AT WOMEN'S RIGHTS CONFERENCE

Classified By: POLECON COUNSELOR ROB GARVERICK FOR REASON 1.4 (B&D)

Istanbul Conference Post Mortem

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¶1. (C) Baku Iran watcher met for two and a half hours on December 3 with prominent Azerbaijani human rights activist Novella Jafaroglu and fourteen other Azerbaijan residents who had just returned from participating in a November 28-30 Iran-Turkey-Azerbaijan women's rights conference in Istanbul. The conference was indirectly supported by USG Iran civil society promotion funds (unbeknownst to most of the Iranian and Turkish participants). Jafaroglu, the winner of several international awards for her human rights and peace promotion activities, was the main organizer of the Istanbul conference which included 53 formal participants including prominent activists from Iran and the Iranian diaspora, as well as Turkey and Azerbaijan. According to Jafaroglu, no press was present.

¶2. (C) Istanbul Iran watcher attended the conference and will report highlights septel. This cable provides a post-mortem on the event and related comments from Azerbaijan-based participants (including two Iranians). In addition to Jafaroglu, the Azerbaijani delegation included several other prominent human rights and civil society figures, as well as two academic experts on Iran from Baku State University (Azerbaijan, s & Harvard8). Several of the Azerbaijani attendees (including Jafaroglu) have family ties to Iran, and some have recently traveled there.

Conference Attracts Iranians

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¶3. (C) Most of the Azerbaijani group praised the Istanbul conference as a resounding success that could represent a breakthrough for Iranian civil society activists in their ability to network with and get their story out more effectively to the international human rights community. A total of 22 delegates from Iran and five from the Iranian diaspora attended. In addition, several delegates noted that approximately twenty Iranian students in Turkey came to the meeting on the first day without invitation and ended up also taking part in its formal and informal discussions.

¶4. (C) Although Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi did not attend, several delegates noted that she sent a congratulatory letter and was represented by some close associates. Other prominent Iranian figures did attend, including Hamburg-based Sayeed Hasan Shariatmadari, whose "straightforward and completely factual" speech on the first day of the conference was cited by several participants as a

highlight. Jafaroglu said that a written report on the conference and a DVD including conference speeches are under preparation and will be provided to Iran watcher within the next week.

Turks, Azerbaijanis & Shocked8 By Iran Conditions

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¶15. (C) Several delegates commented that before hearing and meeting with Iranian speakers at the conference they had not realized how "awful" and "primitive" the human rights reality in Iran really is. Reports which shocked them included details on child execution, stoning, allegedly common raping of arrested female activists ("including virgin girls") by police, and legalized repression of women "even written in their Constitution." According to the Azerbaijanis, the Turkish human rights figures that attended the conference were equally amazed at the trials and challenges related by the Iranians.

Turkish NGO to Spotlight Iranians

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¶16. (C) One result, according to Jafaroglu, is that the Ankara-based Turkish World Research Center, her Turkish partner in organizing the event, has decided to dedicate one full day of a planned international human rights conference it is hosting in Ankara on December 20-22 to Iranian human rights issues. She added that the Turkish group will provide financing to bring several Iranian activists to this meeting.

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Disparate Iranians Meet and Network

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¶17. (C) Jafaroglu also pointed out that the Iranian attendees at the Istanbul conference included Azeris, Kurds, Ahwaz Arabs, and Turkmen, as well as ethnic Persians, while Iranian political tendencies represented included nationalists, monarchists, democratic liberals (like Shariatmadari), communists, and reformist Islamists.

¶18. (C) A Baku-based Iranian activist asserted that normally it is impossible for such disparate individuals to hold a meeting together even overseas, much less inside Iran. She opined that the Azerbaijani-Turkish organizing umbrella and the non-political agenda gave these Iranians a unique opportunity to meet together in a cooperative and non-confrontational environment. An Iranian feminist present agreed, observing that the Iranian participants worked together without tension at the event, and held extensive discussions and exchanges with each other in the evenings and outside the formal contours of the conference. She called this Iranian networking &by far the most important success of the conference.

Iranian Feminism ) Strongest in the Region?

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¶19. (C) The Iranian claimed that the growing cadre of educated women and the &systematized8 repression of women by the Iranian regime have ironically resulted in an Iranian feminist movement which is both larger and more sophisticated than that found in the Caucasus or Turkey. At the same time, she noted that in addition to promoting Iranian-Iranian networking, events like the Istanbul conference are extremely helpful in giving &voiceless8 Iranian activists greater access to the outside world and knowledge on how to more effectively interact with it.

Private Freedom, Public Repression

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¶10. (C) An Azerbaijani who said she frequently visits relatives in Iran interjected that over the years she has

observed an increasing contrast between the gradually liberalizing condition of women & behind closed doors in the home<sup>8</sup> and the repressive restrictions they face in public society and before the law due to regime practices. In the face of objections from others in the group, she argued that the situation in much of Iran is the opposite of many other countries where the laws are liberal but private social attitudes and practices are not. Comment: Though some participants disagreed with her claims, her comments echo what we have heard from some other Iranian sources. To the extent it exists, it is unclear if this & private liberalization<sup>8</sup> process is mainly an urban/middle class phenomenon or a trend in wider society as well. Iran watcher will continue to collect informed views on this topic. End Comment.

#### Need for Follow-Up and Sustainability

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¶11. (C) A frequently repeated theme among the Azerbaijani activists is that the Istanbul conference was successful, but only as a & first step.<sup>8</sup> Many emphasized the need for strategic follow-up sustainability in the effort to bolster Iranian civil society and better get the word out internationally about the current challenges facing women and larger society in Iran. Apart from further efforts in the area of women's rights, Jafaroglu related recommendations from members of Ebadi's group that separate regional conferences focusing on children's rights, drug addiction and HIV/AIDS, environmental pollution, and other social issues be organized.

¶12. (C) Jafaroglu and several other Azerbaijanis speculated that these conferences could be held in Azerbaijan, Turkey, or somewhere in Europe ) all agreed it is desirable, but none believed it is possible, to hold such conferences in Iran. Another activist suggested that the USG consider indirectly funding a notional information center for Iranians in Baku (an activity which might not go down well with the GOAJ authorities).

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¶13. (C) Iran watcher urged the experienced group to collectively brainstorm and develop more concrete proposals for new projects that would be both effective and practical, and they agreed to do so. Iran watcher obtained contact data for all of the Azerbaijan-based participants, and will be following up with several of them individually on Iranian issues in coming weeks.

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